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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers might consider teaching children to become critical readers through the use of traditional literature. It is not necessarily difficult to define critical reading, but it is a difficult task to teach students when and how to read critically. The six skills most important to critical reading are that the reader should (1) read material with an alert and questioning mind, (2) compare and contrast what has been read, (3) consider the author's viewpoint and be aware of other viewpoints, (4) detect propaganda techniques, (5) identify relevant and irrelevant information, and (6) differentiate fact from opinion. To critically analyze traditional literature (such as folktales, myths, or legends), one must first understand the characteristics of each genre and be aware that each culture has unique beliefs and geographical positions. The task of the critical reader is to analyze and then apply literary elements such as main character, setting, plot, and conclusion to several tales. Possible titles for use are "Too Much Noise" for primary grades, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" for primary/middle grades, and "Cinderella" for middle grades. Since the excellent variety of traditional literature lends itself to analysis, a classroom teacher could consider using it to teach critical reading. Tables illustrate ways to compare various tales or to note similarities and differences in the main character, setting, conflict, advice, animals, and resolution of conflict. (DF)

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USING TRADITIONAL LITERATURE TO TEACH CRITICAL READING SKILLS

Introduction

Classroom teachers might consider teaching children to become critical readers through the use of traditional literature. They must find quality literature which lends itself to analyses so children can learn to apply specific skills of critical reading. Traditional literature has a wealth of quality literary elements. Specific titles will be presented herein which lend themselves to specific analyses such as comparison/contrast or use of illustrations to help a child better understand cultures of the world by critically evaluating what has been read.

Critical Reading Defined

Critical reading is the process of evaluating and passing personal judgment on the quality, value, accuracy, and/or truthfulness of what is read (Smith & Dechant, p. 357). The reader must evaluate the accuracy of the material, synthesize information, make comparisons and references, and suspend judgment to avoid jumping to conclusions. Critical readers must be able to recognize the author's purpose, point-of-view and use of language. Critical readers should test the author's assertions against their own observations, information and logic (Stoodt, p. 199).

To be a critical reader in the best sense means that one is able to understand more accurately, enjoy more fully, and evaluate more fairly what one reads (Danziger & Johnson, introduction).

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These are but a few of the many definitions of critical reading available in the literature. Defining critical reading is the easy task. The most difficult task is teaching students when and how to read critically. Critical reading should be an on-going, integral part of the student's everyday reading. The following six skills seem most important and germane to the area known as critical reading:

1. The critical reader should read material with an alert and questioning mind.
2. The critical reader should compare and contrast what has been read.
3. The critical reader will consider the viewpoint of the author and be aware of other possible points-of-view.
4. The critical reader will detect propaganda techniques in the literature.
5. The critical reader will be able to identify relevant and irrelevant information.
6. The critical reader will differentiate fact from opinion.

Application of Critical Reading

The application of specific critical reading skills to literature depends on the genre of literature which has been selected. One facet of literature, traditional or folktales, myths and legends, can be critically studied using several of the six skills mentioned earlier. Specifically, the student should read traditional literature with a questioning mind. The critical reader should be able to compare and contrast traditional literature from various cultures world-wide. For example, it is quite a simple task to locate many of the 500 versions of Cinderella. One can then compare

and contrast the versions, thus recognizing contrasts in cultural roots yet similarities in human emotions, dreams, or religions. Lastly, the critical reader should consider the viewpoint of the author, in this case that which has been handed down orally or has been translated. For example, because the French tales depict the royal court, the humble French peasant point-of-view is many times lacking.

To critically analyze traditional literature one must first understand the characteristics of folktales, myths and legends. Folktales are fiction, usually begin with "once upon a time" and can occur anyplace. The folktale characters can be human or non-human. Myths are considered fact, occur during and before creation and are rooted in the explanation of natural phenomena or religious beliefs. The mythological character is non-human. Lastly, legends are considered factual, occur in the past, more recently than myths, in the present world. The legendary heroes are characterized as being human (Norton, 1983).

Next, the critical reader must be aware that each culture has unique beliefs, values, clothing, architecture and geographical position. However, at the same time each culture has similarities in emotions and dreams, to name a few. Traditional tales help students to understand that goodness or courage are qualities of heroes all over the world. For example, the hero in folktales worldwide is nearly always a simple peasant, a kind hearted fool, an honest child, or a caring relative. Across the cultures good wins over evil as the hero sets out on a quest to rescue, save, retrieve, or outwit an evil giant, ogre, stepmother, or dragon. Around the globe

folktales exemplify admirable qualities such as bravery, loyalty, intelligence or honesty. Thus, human commonalities surface; yet, unique cultural heritage differences such as how the characters dress, where they live, or what they eat differentiate each tale according to the roots of the culture represented (Norton, 1983).

To further understand the cultural similarities and differences one can analyze the following elements:

1. main character
2. hero
3. other characters
4. setting
5. plot
6. values of the culture
7. fate of main character, or conclusion

The task of the critical reader is to apply these elements to several tales. More specifically, in the British tales many of the main characters are peasants who live in the countryside and outwit giants or kings. The Norwegian tales include the Northwind and ice queens who live in snowy climates, where honesty and kindness prevail in the values established. The French tales which addressed the nobility include characters such as royal persons who live in castles happily ever after, thus depicting the values of the French noble class. Additionally, the critical reader can gleen much comparison and contrast of information if illustrations are available - assuming from a critical point-of-view, the illustrations are

accurate. Similarly, the critical reader can compare and contrast the accomplishments of the various gods in mythology or the journeys and accomlishments of heroes in epics and legends.

Use of Specific Titles in the Classroom

Primary

It Could Always Be Worse, retold by Zemach, a Jewish tale.

Too Much Noise, by McGovern, a western tale.

After reading It Could Always Be Worse (Zemach, 1976) and Too Much Noise (McGovern, 1967) a primary grade teacher could devise a chart in which the class could compare and contrast the two tales. See Table I.

Once the two tales have been charted, similarities could be underlined with a particular color and dissimilar items underlined with a second color. Color coding could continue regarding the point-of-view, the author, relevant and irrelevant information, and differentiating facts from opinions.

Primary/Intermediate

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, illustrated by Nancy Ekholm Burkert.

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, illustrated by Leo & Diane Dillon.

The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship, illustrated by Uri Shulevitz.

After sharing these books with students, a teacher can capitalize on the excellent illustrations to point out geographical, architectural and cultural dress patterns of a particular country during a specific time period. The analysis of the illustrations becomes the vehicle which leads to critical thinking. Nancy Ekholm Burkert encourages children to visit the medieval

Black Forest of Germany which she so clearly and accurately portrays. Leo and Diane Dillon researched much of the African cultures before illustrating Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears. Students can appreciate the use of vivid colors in African clothing, shelters and animals. Lastly, students who have never been to Russia might better understand the Czar, Russian clothing, peasant life and the architecture of Russia such as the peasant cottage or the onion-shaped domes dating to the Byzantine influence in the 1600's, after they have discussed and researched ideas in the illustrations in The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship.

Middle Grades

Cinderella, a Grimm version, illustrated by Paul Galdone.

"Indian Cinderella", in North American Legends, edited by Virginia Haviland.

The comparison of two similar tales allows students to analyze the possible origins of tales. Why are there 500 versions of Cinderella? What do all cultures have in common? Do all humans have basic needs and emotions which are similar? Students can begin to answer these questions when they compare the aforementioned versions of Cinderella. The following questions might be charted to compare and contrast the "Indian Cinderella" and the version by Grimm:

1. What was the young girl wearing when she first met her husband?
2. What kind of a person was the young girl?
3. What was the position of the future husband?
4. Who changed the young girl?
5. What happened to the two sisters?

6. What type of a person was the young man?

7. Which Cinderella was happiest in the end? Why?

See Table II.

Middle Grades

Book of Greek Myths, D'aulaire.

Norse Gods and Giants, D'aulaire.

As might be expected, the myths of various geographical locations have many commonalities. Man will always wonder: Who was the first man? Why does the sun go away every day? To answer these questions students might study two books by Ingri and Edgar Parin D'aulaire, Book of Greek Myths and Norse Gods and Giants.

Creation in Greek mythology is quite calm when Mother Earth and Father Uranus, the sky, come together. In contrast, it is fire and fog which generate a frost giant and an ice cow which explains creation in Norse mythology. Both the Greeks and the Norsemen envisioned the sun and moon as being drawn by horses in a cart or chariot across the sky. Many comparisons and contrasts such as these can be made after students have studied both areas of mythology. Again, one of the best ways for the younger child to analyze information might be to chart it in an organized fashion.

Conclusion

The youngest of children can be taught to evaluate what they read. However, they can only evaluate a selection which is quality literature. The excellent variety of traditional literature available lends itself to analyses. A classroom teacher should consider taking the time to find excellent

selections to analyze and to creatively motivate the students with a variety of activities regarding the selections. Traditional literature is rich in vocabulary, language, development, cultural traditions and presentation of human similarities. Traditional literature allows the critical reader to read between the lines and to maintain an alert and questioning mind.

TABLE I

Title	Main Character	Setting	Conflict	Advice	Animals	Resolution of Conflict
It Could Always Be Worse (Zemach)	A very poor man	crowded one-room hut	man's family makes too much noise	take animals into hut to live with family	chickens rooster goose cow goat	Rabbi tells man to get animals out of hut, man is satisfied
Too Much Noise (McGovern)	An old man	small, old house	things in and around the house make too much noise	take animals into the house	cow donkey hen cat dog sheep	wise man tells old man to let animals go, old man is satisfied

TABLE II

	Cinderella illus., Galdone	Indian Cinderella
1. What was the young girl wearing when she first met her future husband?		
2. What kind of a person was the young girl?		
3. What was the position of the future husband?		
4. What changed the girl?		
5. What happened to the two sisters?		
6. What type of person was the young man?		
7. Which Cinderella was happiest in the end? Why?		

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